

In 2020 we have experienced more disruption, change, suffering and loss than imaginable. Much of what we have come to depend on has either been put on pause or stopped altogether. Such large-scale change and disruption can tear at the fabric of social institutions. The church, however, when at its healthiest, expects these storms to come and is nimble enough to weather them because its hope isn't found in traditions, status or familiar routine. Rather, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Christian community reflects its assurance in God through its life together based on:

- Spiritual love for one another rather than emotional love
- Spiritual practices that keep God in the forefront, not the background
- Solitude before God rather than noise of self-righteousness
- Service to another through listening, active helpfulness and forbearance
- Confession of sins from one Christian sinner to another

Bonhoeffer devotes a chapter to each of these in his classic book, *Life Together*.<sup>\*</sup> Bonhoeffer knew something about Christian life lived together before God; as a professor at Finkenwalde Seminary he was molding the lives of seminarians in the face of the rise of Hitler's Third Reich. Everything that Christians had taken for granted about their lives in enlightened Germany were being challenged. A devout nation, Germany was also on the cutting edge of art, philosophy and innovation. But out of such success came collapse after the great war, the worldwide depression and devastating inflation that left Germany weak and uncertain.

The Covid-19 pandemic, a renewed racial reckoning, partisan political rancor, job loss, school closings and no sports (!!!) have left our heads spinning and grasping for something certain to hold on to. How should Christians respond in the face of so much change, so quickly? Bonhoeffer's *Life Together* has helped me address this question. He was clear that an individual Christian's faith was tied up in the participation and purpose of the larger Christian community. He believed a Christian community's life

together can withstand these disruptions because its purpose is founded on honoring God's work in sinful people despite its brokenness. Their shared daily practices, selfless love, Bible reading, meditative prayer, service to one another and confession didn't change when the world around them changed. Rather, these practices prepared them to face difficulties. They defined the community.

The world around the faith community of Huguenot Road Baptist Church has been altered for the foreseeable future. Consequently, we have had to change some of the familiar ways we gather for worship and discipleship. But, has such changes impacted who we are and why we exist as a faith community? Where we feel it has, we must look at the practices and expectations that make us feel this way. Are they from God or from our own emotional reaction? Where we have held firm in devotion to God, we should celebrate and continue in that path.

Bonhoeffer is teaching me that while changes will come to society and to our churches that are scary, not only can we find blessed assurance in the core practices of our faith, they can pave the way to new life and vitality for our tomorrow. Pray for our church and leaders as we navigate this path. May we do so with humility, forbearance and grace toward one another, because otherwise, change is so hard.

-Matthew Hensley

\*Check out Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*. There are editions available from Harper Collins and Fortress Press. It is a brief but "meaty" volume that will have you chewing on God's wisdom for days and weeks to come.